

DoD: SMALLPOX VACCINATIONS ARE UNDERWAY

By Sgt. 1st Class Doug Sample, USA / American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Dec. 13, 2002 -- DoD has started mandatory smallpox vaccinations of military personnel, according to the Department of Defense's top health official.

Dr. William Winkenwerder, assistant secretary of defense for health affairs, said the process would continue "over the next weeks and months." He said DoD is concentrating initial immunizations on units with "high priority." He said National Guard and Reserve units would be added in the near future.

"There are a fairly large number of troops that have been identified as being the highest priority, the most important to vaccinate," he said. "We'll start with ... teams that would respond in the case of an attack, followed by military medical personnel, and then certain forces that we believe would be important to carry out any missions ... in the near future."

Mass smallpox vaccinations of service members come amid growing White House and Pentagon concerns about bio-terrorist attack threats that U.S. and allied forces would face if Iraq or any enemy has a store of smallpox virus.

Although Winkenwerder would not confirm any specific threat against U.S. military personnel, he did say the services need to be prepared now.

"We can't quantify the threat, and it would be inappropriate to suggest exactly the degree to that threat. But we know that smallpox spores do exist. We know that there are people who are unfriendly to our country," he said. "You put those together and it certainly creates the possibility that smallpox could be used in a deliberate way. So our first order of duty and business in the military health systems is to be prepared."

Being prepared raises hundreds of questions for Winkenwerder. His office has been working closely with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on the issue, compiling fact sheets for military personnel covering everything from the nature of smallpox to vaccine safety.

Young military personnel probably know little about the virus and its symptoms. In the United States, routine vaccination against smallpox ended around 1972, well before many of them were born. According to the CDC, the last naturally occurring case was in Somalia in 1977. In May 1980, the World Health Organization recommended that all countries cease vaccination. U.S. military smallpox vaccination programs continued in small degree until 1990.

Smallpox is a highly contagious and sometimes fatal disease for which there is no specific treatment. The disease kills about 30 percent of all people infected, according to the CDC. Currently, the only preventive measure against the disease is the smallpox vaccine.

The vaccination, usually given in the upper arm, requires a two-pronged needle that pricks the skin several times. If the vaccination is successful, a red-itchy bump will appear in three to four days. Reactions to the vaccination include swelling, headache, fatigue, muscle aches, pain, or chills. Some people may have rashes that last from two to four days.

"We've spent quite a bit of time over the past several months putting together all the educational training material, spending time with medical personnel to get their best advice and input," Winkenwerder said. "We've used what we felt were the very best medical experts in the U.S. and around the world to give us advice on how to do this in just the right way."

The vaccine being issued to service members has been sitting on the shelves of U.S. research labs since 1972, Winkenwerder said he's sure it's still safe and effective.

"The vaccine is a safe vaccine; however, it does have some side effects that need to be carefully monitored and carefully managed," he said. He believes those side effects can be managed effectively.

The CDC reports that about 1,000 people for every 1 million people vaccinated for the first time experienced serious reactions, though not life-threatening ones, and that one or two people per million vaccinated risk death as a result.

Winkenwerder said all military personnel receiving the smallpox inoculation would be given careful instructions on what to do in case side effects appear. In addition, a telephone hotline will be set up to provide information what to do for any adverse reaction to the vaccine.